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ABSTRACT

Responding to the dramatic changes in the style and form of communication, a communication instructor integrated the Internet into his communication courses at a liberal arts college. Students are required to sign up for a discussion group (listserv) that focuses on the course offering as well as a discussion group in their area of interest. Every other week, students write summaries of what happened in their discussion groups and e-mail it to the instructor. Students are encouraged to access as much information as they can as part of the information gathering process for their writing assignments. Students are also expected to conduct themselves according to the "rules" of the Internet. Five reasons students engage in this assignment are: (1) to gain an understanding of how to use electronic media; (2) to obtain a greater appreciation for the discipline of communication; (3) to start "networking" in their area of concentration; (4) to develop an understanding of the amount of information available; and (5) to combat the perception that graduates of small liberal arts colleges received little or no exposure to the latest technologies while in college. The assignment also led to an increase in the amount and quality of communication experienced in the student/professor relationship. The purposes for which students used electronic mail focused upon general communication, apologies, clarification of assignments, and to further examine in-class discussions. Electronic mail has afforded an additional channel of communication between the instructor and his students. (Contains nine references.) (RS)

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Classroom Exercise that Incorporates Internet
Discussion Groups as an Integral Element
in a Communication Course

by

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"Three days before the [Iraqi] invasion [of Kuwait], Defense Intelligence Agency analyst Pat Lang sat down to write a top-secret electronic-mail message about Iraqi troops on the Kuwait border" (Woodward, 1991, p. 24). Ten years ago, Lang would have communicated his message about the Iraqi troops by typing it and sending a memo to other Defense Intelligence officers through interoffice mail, a very slow and cumbersome method of transmitting information. Lang sent his message using electronic mail because it offered an instantaneous, secure, accurate, and efficient transmission of his message.

The need for effective and efficient communication has provided the impetus for the creation of large-scale, computer-mediated communication systems (Blackman & Clevenger, 1990; Chesebro, 1985; Clarke, 1991; Compaine, 1988; Cook & Ridley, 1990; Gengle, 1984). With the development of communication systems such as electronic mail, the manner and means by which we communicate have been altered (Johansen & DeGrasse, 1992).

Because the style and form of communication are undergoing a dramatic change, it is critical that the classrooms also undergo change so that educators adequately prepare students for functioning in society in the 21st century. This author will

present one recommendation as to how the Internet can be integrated into communication courses.

The System

The system is a UNIX environment that provides universal access (all faculty and students have an account) to the Internet. The system was made available to the faculty and computer science students in the fall of 1993. The entire student body was given access in the fall of 1994. In my informal discussions with students, I have found that they are very interested and excited about the opportunity to use electronic media as a part of their assignments because of the tremendous amount of print and broadcast media coverage of the information highway. Thus, student interest and media coverage have created a need to incorporate the Internet as a part of the day-to-day activities students experience in the communication classroom. To fail to use electronic media as a part of the communication classroom denies students the experience of one of the newest and exciting forms of communication.

What is Expected?

Any time that an instructor gives an assignment, the activities in which the student will be involved should be readily apparent. In this assignment, students should monitor and participate in discussion groups, use the Internet as a tool

to gather information, and conduct themselves according to the "rules" of the Internet.

The main benefit that the students will take from this activity is the experience of sending and receiving messages electronically. Since sending and receiving messages is a major focus, each student in the class is required to sign up for a discussion group that focuses on the course offering (this author uses CRTNET for a communication theory course), as well as a discussion group in his or her area of interest (e.g., a radio-television major could sign up for H-FILM or SCREEN-L). It is recommended that the second discussion group have an academic focus (since there are many discussion groups have non-academic foci, the instructor may wish to have students send the name of their second discussion to the instructor so that he or she can double-check the focus of the discussion group).

Once the students have signed up for the discussion groups, they are expected to monitor their mail (and contribute if they would like) and send the instructor (every other week) a summary of what has been happening in their discussion groups (often discussion groups tend to focus on certain themes and thus a brief summary is not difficult). The summaries are expected to be no more than two screens in length (you could choose your own length, but a part of communicating electronically is communicating as briefly as possible), and must be sent via electronic mail.

Students also are encouraged to access as much information as they can. Since the UNIX system used at my institution allows students to access the information server Mosaic, students are expected to use the Mosaic as a part of the information gathering process for their writing assignments (methods of citing the Internet are discussed in class). To encourage an atmosphere of information sharing, those students who find something particularly interesting on Mosaic are encouraged to share the information with the class (where they found the information, what the information means, and the process through which they discovered the information). Instructors may wish to limit the information gathering discussions to the communication discipline (I assume that students will talk amongst themselves about how to access information about concert dates, professional sports stars' statistics, etc. so that classroom time will not be taken discussing the non-academic but nonetheless important information that can be accessed using Mosaic).

Finally, students are expected to conduct themselves according to the "rules" of the Internet. A class session is taken to introduce the students to some of the nonverbal surrogates that often are used in electronic communication, as well as phenomena such as flaming. Obviously the materials covered during this class session will change (at least in the near future) as the evolution of appropriate behavior on the Internet continues to develop.

Purpose of the Assignments

There are five reasons that the students engage in this assignment: to gain an understanding of how to use electronic media, to obtain a greater appreciation for the discipline of communication, start the students "networking" in their area of concentration, to develop an understanding of the amount of information available, and to combat the perception that graduates of small liberal arts colleges received little or no exposure to the latest technologies while in college.

First, students gain an understanding of how to use electronic media because they are required to send electronic mail messages to the professor, and they are also expected to sign up for, monitor, and participate in discussion groups. By engaging in these activities, the students will be forced to use electronic mail as a means of communication, and thus will gain experience, understanding, and knowledge of how electronic mail systems work. Research indicates that electronic mail is used extensively in today's organization (Bruning, 1994). Using an electronic mail system while in college will give students' experience in a form of communication in which they will be engaged throughout their career.

Second, students gain a greater appreciation for the influence that communication research has in today's society. By monitoring a communication discussion group, the student will begin to notice the breadth of study in the communication

discipline and should realize that research in the communication discipline focuses on current problems in today's society. As a result of monitoring a discussion group, the students should take with them a greater understanding of: the communication discipline, the research process, and the generally collegial nature of the communication discipline.

Third, students have the opportunity to begin to make contacts in their area of interest. When a student uses the Internet for communication, he or she indicates that he or she is computer literate, able to use the Internet, and embraces new technologies. It must be noted at this point, however, that because the author has implemented this design only three courses significant evidence is not available as to whether the establishment of contacts actually happens (although personally I have found that students use E-mail extensively to stay in contact with parents and friends).

Fourth, students gain a greater appreciation for the amount of information that is available to them via the Internet. Although the application of much of what is done in this design is targeted for communication courses, the knowledge that students gain about computers and their capabilities is applicable to all of the courses in which they are enrolled. By introducing students to the Internet and information servers such as Mosaic, the benefits will be realized not only in this class, but, hopefully, in all classes.

Fifth, students will be able to demonstrate that they have been exposed to the latest in technological communication. It is the perception of some that small colleges provide for students magnificent liberal art's education, but fail to adequately train students in the latest technologies (generally because the small colleges cannot afford the latest technologies). Faculty members who use the Internet as a part of their communication classroom activities will be introducing students to the information age, and will help students to graduate with an education that is grounded firmly in the liberal arts, but also provides exposure to the latest in technologies. Combining liberal arts education with the latest technologies is a combination that should be very appealing to many prospective employers.

Findings

The educational outcomes of the assignment (to give students the opportunity to experience the Internet, to expose them to the most recent research in the communication field, and to help facilitate their understanding of what is happening in their chosen area of concentration) were fulfilled. In addition to the educational outcomes, this author found that electronic mail facilitated an increase in the amount and quality of communication experienced in the student/professor relationship. Specifically, the purposes for which students used electronic mail focused upon general communication (what's going on in their

and my world), apologies, clarification of assignments, and to further examine in-class discussions.

General communication. The first and most pleasant surprise of incorporating electronic communication into my classroom activities were that I experienced a dramatic change in the amount that I interacted with my students, particularly those who were not likely to interact with me in a face-to-face interaction. Approximately 50-60% of my E-mail interactions dealt with content that would be classified as interpersonal communication. By having an additional medium through which I could communicate, I was able to gain insight into my students interests (both academic and nonacademic). Likewise, students were able to experience some of the academic and nonacademic interests that I pursue. I found that when students communicated via electronic mail they were very frank, and although status differences may still have existed, they were, however, diminished.

Apologies. A second purpose for which students used electronic mail communication extensively was to apologize either for missing a class or performing poorly on a paper/examination. Although this author had not predicted that this type of communication would take place over electronic mail, it did provide an avenue through which students could feel comfortable "discussing" negative aspects of the course. As an aside, I would always correspond with the students about their performance

via E-mail, but then require them to come in and discuss their examination with me in a face-to-face interaction.

Clarification of assignments. A third purpose for which students used electronic mail extensively was to ask for clarification on assignments. I established a rule that indicated that on the day before an assignment/test was due/given, I would check my mail at 9:30 the evening before. If anyone had a question, they could post it to me and know that they would receive an answer that would give them enough time to complete the assignment. This help to eliminate some of the late-night calls, and gave students the opportunity to ask questions they might not otherwise ask.

Further class discussions. Every once in a long while a student would want to further a class discussion by providing an example that he or she had. Typically the discussion would be from a student who does not speak much during class, but also a student who was fairly bright. Also, the examples that were given typically were excellent examples that should have been brought into class in the first place.

Conclusions

What electronic mail has afforded is an additional channel of communication between myself and my students. The results has been that the students have come to a greater understanding of the different forms of communication, and I have developed a more open, honest, and healthy communication relationship with my

students. In general, use of electronic mail has enhanced the communication that takes place in and out of the classroom by giving students a non-traditional vehicle through which they are able to communicate their thoughts and ideas. Electronic mail has provided a more open exchange of ideas, a channel for increasing the communication exchange between student and professor, and an additional method for students and faculty to interact about a variety of topics.

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